

# FAREWELL TO A PRO-LIFE HERO

*by Jonathon Van Maren*

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**F**lorida's most notorious abortion clinic is located at 1103 Lucerne Terrace in downtown Orlando. On the sidewalk directly in front of this clinic, the Orlando Women's Center, there are two prominent marks in the concrete. They are signs of an extraordinary story.

The concrete was worn away by the feet of John Barros, who for nearly two decades stood outside this clinic as a sidewalk counselor, preaching and calling out to the women going inside. He would offer them help and beg them to change their minds about getting an abortion. He showed up day after day, in all weather, despite his own health struggles. Visiting the clinic one day, I saw small indents next to the worn patches on the sidewalk—I later learned they were from John's crutches, which he required ever since getting back surgery. On February 15, John died after a struggle with cancer. His earthly labors have ended; others will pick up the torch, but Barros was a once-in-a-generation giant.

Many have walked past him into the clinic as he called to them; thousands have aborted their babies while hearing his voice. But year after year, about thirty women a month changed their minds. It is impossible to know precisely how many babies were saved, but a safe estimate is well over 3,000. When I attended his church one Sunday while on a pro-life tour of Florida campuses, I spotted him sitting near the front in a pew filled with young women, many of them cradling babies and lugging car seats. He had met them at the abortion clinic and invited them to St. Andrew's Chapel. His church authorized him to offer the women whatever they needed, from rent money to diapers.

I first heard of John over a decade ago, when a short video on his work titled “**Who Will Stand**”

was published on YouTube. Twenty years ago, a pastor friend invited him to the Orlando Women's Center to sidewalk counsel; he says the offer of a cigar won him over. He began going to the clinic regularly. Then, despite a brutal series of health concerns—including two brain aneurysms, cancer, and back surgery—he felt called to make the Orlando Women's Center his full-time ministry. Sitting on a wall next to a place he would call “a house of madness,” he prayed to God, asking him to take care of his family. Through a series of circumstances Barros referred to as “miraculous,” God answered those prayers.

To spend the day with John on the sidewalk was to witness awful things. The first time I joined him, the girls started showing up early, many visibly pregnant. The clinic does late-term abortions, which usually take at least two days. John told us that some had been there the day before to start the process. The abortionist often sent the girls outside to speed up labor. “You have no idea what kind of demons live in this place,” he said. “Sometimes the doctor has rap music pounding out in the parking lot and pregnant girls marching around to make labor go faster. *Get those knees up! Faster!* It's evil. It's awful.”

John called the sloping driveway leading to the clinic's back parking lot “the Valley of Decision.” Many girls stopped there to talk; many decided to turn around. As each girl showed up, John started calling. *Don't do this. We can give you any help you need. Medical care. A place to stay. I'm here to help. If the boyfriend is the problem, I've driven girls to safe houses in Tennessee.* Some boyfriends showed up with their girlfriends, who shuffled toward the door, heads down. *Guys, be a real man. Protect her!* Angry men threatened John many times; some had guns. His faith in God rendered him fearless, and his confidence usually cowed them.

When the clinic's waiting room was full, John turned to the other sidewalk counselors and volunteers. It was time to sing, he told us. Sometimes, singing made the girls come out. He passed around hymnals and we began. “Abide With Me.” “Come Thou Fount.” “Crown Him With Many Crowns.” A pregnant girl in a red jumpsuit went into the clinic; we started “Amazing Grace.” She came back out, and John met her at the curb to talk. A young man pulled up in a van. After a few minutes, the couple pulled away, waving all the way down the street. “It was the singing!” John said. “Praise God, she's keeping her baby! Seven months along, they're so happy, did you see that? Look, they're still wavin'!” He laughed gruffly, but it sounded light and bubbly. John turned to me. “Isn't it amazing what God will do if you just show up?” Another girl stopped in the Valley of Decision to talk to John. Twenty minutes later, she decided, and left with a volunteer for the crisis pregnancy center. John shook his head. “It's

awesome,” he said. And it was. Four babies were saved that day.

Every day, John showed up between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m. with his stacks of brochures and bullhorns. As the years went on, others joined him; when his health made it difficult to stand outside the clinic six days a week, a friend took over on Saturdays. Strangely, the clinic staff grew to love him, and would call out “Hi, John!” as they headed in. One Thanksgiving, they invited him in through the back door to share a meal with them. He used the opportunity to share the gospel; half of them quit the abortion business, forcing the shutdown of one clinic location. John refused all credit. If anyone ever asked him how many babies he’d saved, he would insist that he had saved none—only God could change the hearts of the women walking past.

I asked him, once, how he’d felt called to the pro-life movement. “I wasn’t called to the pro-life movement,” he replied. “God called me to forty feet of sidewalk.” For nearly two decades, that is where he stayed, his feet wearing down the concrete, his words wearing away at thousands of hard hearts. His friend and pastor, theologian R. C. Sproul, was a passionate supporter of his ministry; Sproul once called the sidewalk in front of 1103 Lucerne Terrace “the gates of hell.” Yet it was there that John Barros reaped a great harvest of life.

*Jonathon Van Maren is the author of **Patriots: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Pro-Life Movement.***